

## ADDRESS TO THE WELLINGTON GOETHE SOCIETY, 20 NOVEMBER 2010

### INTRODUCTION

Goethe's name pops up in unexpected places. Even in Wellington's *Capital Times*. As some of you will know, this indispensable organ of publicity features a Quotation of the Week. There on 20 October, in the "What's On" pages, a lone rock amidst the ephemeral foam of Wellington's entertainments, stood Goethe's aphorism: "Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do."

In the original: "Es ist nicht genug, zu wissen, man muss auch anwenden. Es ist nicht genug zu wollen, man muss auch tun." It's from *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* – but have no fears, I'm not going to start talking now about *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*. No – because what Goethe's words in fact recalled to me were the similar words of a President of the Wellington Goethe Society many years ago, who thought that neither the Society's committee, nor its members, had been adequately applying and doing, and expressed his annoyance in his Annual Report in these words:

Every organisation is made up of four bones – wishbones, jawbones, knucklebones and backbones. The wishbones spend their time wishing somebody else would do the work. The jawbones are those who do all the talking but little else. The knucklebones [who] knock everything that everybody tries to do. The backbones [who] carry the load and do the work."

He then invited his listeners to search their consciences.

The reason I've begun in this way is that I want to congratulate most sincerely all those who over the years have in Goethe's words known *and* applied, willed *and* done: the "backbones" who've ensured that this Society is now celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. It's a terrific achievement, won against odds. Recent and current office-holders and committee members especially have a right to self-congratulation. The survival of the Society has not been a matter of course. In both the university cities in which I studied German, the Goethe Society has disappeared. There used to be six in New Zealand; now there are four. I hope that there are members present here committed enough for the Wellington society to flourish for many years yet. It's worth the effort – as my account of the Society's history will show.

### THE SOCIETY'S ORIGIN:

First, a brief explanation of how it came by its name. There *is* a Goethe Society in Germany, the *Deutsche Goethe-Gesellschaft*, with its headquarters in Weimar, but it serves a quite different function from ours: it was founded in 1885 to preserve and to serve the heritage of Goethe's life and work, including his house, the *Goethe-Archiv* and the *Goethe-Nationalmuseum* in Weimar; so it's the equivalent in Germany of the Shakespeare Society in Britain. More significant for us was the foundation in the following year, 1886, of the English Goethe Society. This still exists today, and is the oldest learned society in the UK dedicated to things German. Its interests extend beyond Goethe to the *Goethezeit* as a whole, ie late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century literature and culture; its journal, *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, is a respected scholarly journal.

When, in 1948, the Lecturer in Modern Languages at the University of Auckland, John Asher, founded a Goethe Society there, it was explicitly modelled on the English Goethe Society, with whose president Asher had discussed the project, and it was affiliated to the English society. The idea was to have a body, linked to the University but officially outside it, which would give encouragement to German studies throughout the country. Its stated aim was "To promote German studies, with Goethe as the central figure". 51 people came to its inaugural meeting. A similar Society was founded in Australia in 1949.

From the beginning – 1948 – the Auckland Goethe Society not only organised a programme of talks, but also produced plays in German, and ran a German competition for schools, familiar features of our own Society. After New Zealand established diplomatic relationships with the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1950s, it was able – as was later our own Society – to count on moral and financial support from the German Embassy.

In 1949 came the bicentenary of Goethe's birth. In Germany this held unusually profound significance. After the nightmare of the Nazi regime and its crimes, Germans faced moral crisis, and were in desperate need of sources of spiritual renewal. Millions flooded into the churches: these were unprecedented boom years for Christianity in Germany, evidence of which exists to this day in the name of the largest German conservative party, the Christian Democratic Union. But Goethe too was rediscovered: not the young rebel of *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, nor the sensualist of the *Venezianische Epigramme*, but the older Goethe, the believer in the fundamental worth of human beings as individuals, the mature champion of humanism, tolerance and universalism. In short, in Goethe was found a diametric opposite to Hitler.

Just how profoundly the Wellington Goethe Society was influenced by this view of Goethe is shown by a document which I discovered by accident after I joined the German Department here in 1972. Fortunately I kept it. Its title is "Purpose and Functions of the Wellington Goethe Society", and I want to read to you in their entirety the second and third of its four serious paragraphs.

Members of a Goethe Society are aware of Goethe's central position in the history of the German mind. Goethe and his age – the age of German Classical and Romantic Literature and Idealistic philosophy – set a standard, bequeath a legacy and are a challenge: that of German humanism and universalism. As varied as the activities of a Goethe Society will be, everything that clouds and narrows the horizon of humanity is ruled out. There is no room for divisions that are both anti-humanistic and unrealistic, such as nationalism, confessionalism, and racialism.

Goethe provides us with a fund of wisdom which we cannot afford to leave unused as well as with a leaven of which we are in need. Weighed down by anxiety and reduced by complacency, we are again reminded what man may be and what he is meant to be. Belief in man as the realisation of his highest potentialities, and in humanity as the communion of all striving and creative minds, invisibly linking the remotest past with the unknown future, this is Goethe's creed.

Well, times have changed, haven't they? But if you think that I'm now going to suggest that the Wellington Goethe Society has degenerated over its five decades from an educated circle of intellectual idealists to a frivolous social club amusing itself with car rallies and *Weißwurst*, you're quite wrong. As I'll demonstrate, a study of the Society's history from 1960 to 2010 reveals that the traditions, the continuities, are more striking than the changes. Let's now look at that history.

## **PAUL HOFFMANN**

In the document from which I've just quoted I think I detect the hand of David Carrad, lecturer in German at Victoria. But the founder of the Society was Paul Hoffmann, who was appointed lecturer in German there in 1959, and in 1964 became the founding professor of German.

Paul Hoffmann was Austrian. He'd first come to New Zealand as the son of refugees forced to emigrate by the Nazi invasion of Austria in 1938. His parents worked on a dairy farm at Runciman, near Auckland. In 1940, in Auckland, came a decisive event in Paul's life: he met the exiled German-Jewish poet, Karl Wolfskehl. Paul enrolled at the University of Auckland as an external student, completing an MA in 1947. In 1951 he and his wife Eva returned to Vienna, where Paul completed a PhD on Wolfskehl. You'll see from these dates that Paul was in or near Auckland from 1948 to 1951, ie the first four years of the Auckland Goethe Society. So undoubtedly his later idea

to start a Goethe Society in Wellington derived from his experience of the Auckland model. Any Aucklanders here will rejoice in yet another proof that Auckland does everything first, and better.

The Wellington Society was set up by Paul Hoffmann, Lisl Hilton and Douglas Fraser. Like the Auckland Society it attracted a large membership of German-Jewish refugees, many memorable characters among them. As in Auckland, it also had a close association with the German Department of the University. I remember lecturer David Carrad telling me that he and Paul Hoffmann used to take turns as President. The Society used the secretary of the German Department, it met (as now) at the University, and (as now) it used the University's rooms for its annual Oral Competition for Schools. The Society presented a programme of talks and films very like those presented today; where they differed was in their strong literary focus. The Society also, as now, began and ended the year with social occasions. Of particular note are its play productions. What are now known as annual German Students' play productions were in the sixties Goethe Society play productions, in which the Society and the German Department collaborated. Thus when Max Frisch's *Biedermann und die Brandstifter* was done in 1963, Gottlieb Biedermann was played by student Nelson Wattie, and his wife Babette by Fritzi Farrar – a small, cultivated Austrian lady who must have been twice his age. In the chorus of *Feuerwehrleute* were both Paul Hoffmann and his son Hugo, and the make-up was done by Maria Dronke – a distinguished actress and teacher on whom Monica Tempian, who is here tonight, is currently writing a book. This play was to be done again in 1974 and 1991. Another play by Frisch, *Andorra*, was staged in 1969: it too was to be done again, in 1977 and 1990. Those of you who saw Dürrenmatt's *Die Physiker* this year won't be surprised to learn that this play too was staged in the early years of the society, and again in 1988. *Fräulein Doktor Mathilde von Zahnd* was played, I'm sure to sinister perfection, by Fritzi Farrar.

What exciting productions these must have been – because in the 1960s these classics of postwar theatre were *new plays*. *Biedermann* dates from 1958, *Andorra* and *Die Physiker* both from 1962.

## THE SEVENTIES

When Paul Hoffmann left in 1970 for a chair at the University of Tübingen, he was replaced by the Australian mediaevalist, Professor Con Kooznetzoff. Con Kooznetzoff told me that he didn't like Goethe, and he didn't teach his works. He never himself gave a talk to the Society. He also felt that the Goethe Society should be a community organisation independent of the German Department, and that its President should be not an academic (ie himself), but a person from the community. Thus began a long period in which businessman Herbert Melchior was President – with interruptions every two years as the Society's constitution required. In 1973 the indefatigable Robyn Skrzynska, here tonight, also began an exemplary association with the Society which has lasted to this day, mostly as Secretary, but in some years as President or Treasurer. She'll be able to tell me afterwards what I've got wrong. A period of stability began for the Society. In 1979 it became an Incorporated Society and changed its name to the Goethe Society Wellington, Inc.

Con Kooznetzoff put his energies into promoting German at schools. The Society, as well as organising events for school pupils such as Junior and Senior German Schools Evenings, now also organised German Weekends at Otaki, and *Deutsche Tage*, which attracted large numbers. These were facilitated from 1978 by a rise in the yearly grant from the German government to DM7,000, and the continuing generous backing of the German Embassy, which provided the prizes for the Oral Competition.

Together with the professors of German at Auckland and Otago, Kooznetzoff also pressed the German authorities for the establishment of a Goethe Institute in Wellington. The Goethe Institute, as you'll know, is a quite different creature from the Goethe Society, being the German equivalent of the British Council, created in 1952 for the promotion of German culture abroad, for fostering

cultural exchange with other countries, and for the teaching of German as a foreign language both in Germany and in metropolitan centres around the world. It is an autonomous organisation, but receives financial support from the Federal German Government. Its scope is less broad than that of the Goethe Society, being confined to Germany (which at the time meant only West Germany), excluding other German-speaking countries.

Its first director arrived at the end of 1980, and, as Con Kooznetzoff had died suddenly in August, it was my responsibility as Acting Head of Department to welcome him. At our first meeting I was bemused to be told by him that he hoped the arrival of the Goethe Institute in New Zealand would “kill off” the Goethe Societies, which he assured me consisted of elderly refugees, helplessly attached to the past, who met to indulge their nostalgia over beer and sausages. Germany must count itself fortunate that this vainglorious blunderbuss didn’t opt for its diplomatic service. (I believe he was subsequently posted to Bratislava, no doubt to set about exterminating the Goethe Society there as well.) It should gratify all of us that the two organisations, which are complementary and not competitive in their aims, have survived healthily together, not least because mutual tolerance is so much in the spirit of the sage after whom both are named. Their co-existence has been owed to the good sense exercised by both bodies, to a succession of enlightened directors, and especially to a member of the Goethe Institute’s staff whose goodwill and breadth of perspective over the past twenty-five years have ensured a continuing amicable relationship between the two bodies. This year Judith Geare was awarded the prestigious Klaus von Bismarck Prize for her services to the Goethe Institute. She is with us this evening, and I invite the Goethe Society to show its appreciation of her.

## THE DELBRÜCK YEARS

Professor Hansgerd Delbrück, formerly a student of Paul Hoffmann in Tübingen, occupied the Chair of German from 1982 until his retirement in 2006. During this period he was frequently President of the Society. His creation of a German Literary Society for those with that specific interest was, I believe, without significant effect on the Goethe Society; the Literary Society flourished for a time during the eighties, then lapsed. However, in the mid-eighties Professor Delbrück took an initiative which was to have a lasting effect on the Society. Perceiving that its membership was aging and that the Society needed an infusion of younger blood, he persuaded senior students of German that they should regard it as *their* Society, to be run by them, and with a programme reflecting the interests of younger people, and to a large degree presented by themselves. This happened, and I believe that it is largely as a result of this initiative that the Society has survived to this day. There is a disadvantage: students are transient, and the Society’s committee has thus become less stable in its make-up. But there have always been sufficient students who, in combination with former students, loyal German staff members, and other stalwarts, have shouldered the responsibility of keeping the Society alive.

The year 1985 saw the Society’s 25<sup>th</sup> Jubilee, a splendid celebration organised by a subcommittee under the direction of Dr Renate Koch, who is a guest of honour this evening, and it was addressed by the German Ambassador, Horst Becker. The year 1990 saw the advent of the pre-printed annual programme on a folded card. In 1998 the Society’s first Web page was set up, initially on the Wellington City Council site, and email as a means of contacting members soon followed.

Reflecting the increased role played by students, the year 2002 saw the first production of plays actually *written* by students, one of whom is here tonight: Esther Harcourt. Her entertaining play was one of a double-bill, of which the other was William Connor’s absurdist comedy, *Ein Bett, ein Sessel und eine Badewanne*. While its author is not with us, one of its principal actors is, in the guise of the Society’s Treasurer, Keith Conway, who played with panache an exasperated husband called Horst. At about the same time the Society instituted a *Stammtisch*, a regular meeting-place

for those who enjoyed speaking German. In 2006 there was another first: the Society collaborated with other bodies in sponsoring a Short Film Contest for secondary and tertiary students of German, for which there were 26 entries. This continues.

## SUMMARY

The staple programme of the Society has always been *talks* with German content. Their subjects have been drawn from a wide number of fields: history, literature, philosophy, art, music, architecture, design, science, exploration, wine-growing, folk crafts, model railways. The history of Germans in New Zealand or the Pacific, and German-New Zealand relations, have also provided subjects. Panel discussions have been organised, on subjects ranging from Martin Luther in 1983 to the anniversary of the *Berliner Mauerfall* in 2009. Joint staff-and-student presentations on aspects of German literature have also featured.

The area most likely to attract a big audience is politics. There's a tradition that the Society's Patron, the German Ambassador, is invited to talk on an aspect of Germany and/or Europe of the time; sometimes other representatives of the German Embassy have done so, or the ambassadors of other European nations. However, the most crowded and excited meeting I've ever witnessed was a talk in the 70s by a representative of the *East* German Embassy in Canberra. The Easterfield conference room was packed – with a mostly hostile audience. Among them, as it turned out, were Germans a member of whose family had tried to escape to the West and had been shot dead. The atmosphere was electric. There was anger and shouting.

Speakers have occasionally been of international eminence: notably, in 1983, Vic's new Vice-Chancellor, the distinguished space scientist Ian Axford, later Sir Ian, who took us on a mind-expanding exploration of space. (President Melchior, whose formulations weren't always felicitous, exclaimed in his speech of thanks that everything he'd told us was of course totally unbelievable.)

A trend over the past twenty years is a decline in the number of visiting speakers, writers, actors and artists, and more local speakers. When did a German, Austrian or Swiss writer last speak to the Society? Still, this year's programme did feature the excellent Professor Horst Dippel from Kassel, speaking on "Georg Forster in Neuseeland". The kinds of topics enjoyed have also changed since the 1960s and 1970s in a way which reflects wider social and cultural change. They've become less literary, less "bookish". This is reflected too in the films shown by the Society. Here's what I mean. In 1975 for the Thomas Mann Centenary the Society showed Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, but also Brecht's *Mutter Courage* and Fontane's *Effi Briest*. The following year provided the classic 1926 film of *Faust*, the second part of Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen* of 1924 (*Kriemhilds Rache*), Kleist's *Der Findling*, Lenz's *Deutschstunde*, and the 1961 film of *Faust*. The student play was *Urfaust!* In the year after that Heinrich von Kleist's Bicentenary was celebrated with a showing of *Der zerbrochene Krug*. Today, films are more likely to be recent German feature films which have been on the commercial circuit, such as *Der Tunnel* or *Goodbye Lenin*.

There has always been a mix in the Society of highbrows and lowbrows, who in egalitarian New Zealand are expected to get on together and share each other's tastes. So in 1991, for example, it was expected that those who in April appreciated Dr Peter Walls's erudite disquisition for the Mozart Bicentenary on "Mozart and the Violin", would in September equally enjoy Fred Hartwig's miniature railway trains. The loftiest intellectual peak which the Society has ever been challenged to scale in its fifty years was the lecture of a German professor who chose as his subject a twentieth-century novel of just under 2,000 pages which I'm sure no member had read, except possibly the formidable Dr Gerda Bell, on which he then discoursed in a German of such abstraction that no one understood a syllable – including Dr Gerda Bell. Whether he knew that he was alone on his mountain, I can't say. At the opposite end, as it were down at ground level, there have regularly

been popular games and quiz evenings; there's the *Stammtisch*; and in recent years there have been German treasure hunts by car and on foot.

Equally, there has always been a mix in the Society of those with chiefly cultural or intellectual interests, and those who primarily seek the society of others with whom they can speak German. For a time in the eighties the Society began each meeting with "Deutsche Konversation". But the social and conversational dimension has always been important, as is seen in the tradition that the year opens with a social occasion, and ends with a Christmas Party, often in the form of a *Nikolausfeier*, sometimes at the private home of a member – with sometimes a midwinter dinner or *Glühwein* evening between.

A strong continuity in the Society's activities is seen in its work for schools. I mentioned some features of this of the 1980s. In the 1990s there were in addition Sixth Form German Camps at Forest Lakes; more recently there have been, among other events, Activities Days, Drama Days, Examination Skills Seminars organised by Robyn Skrzynska, and German Immersion Days. But central to the work for schools has been the annual German Oral Competition, which from 1985 was extended to include Nelson. I know from experience how keenly the annual numbers are watched, and can provide you with statistics from 1974 to the present. In that year there were 168 competitors. In 1982 the number reached 205. In 1992 there were 205 in Wellington, and 48 in Nelson. It must have been a record. Then came a gentle decline, and in 2001 a fall to 147. In 2006 this had become 115, and in 2008 96. The number went up again last year to 121.

But what about *Society* numbers? you may be wondering. Are there enough of us? Will we survive? This has been a constant concern of the Society, and committees have year by year discussed strategies to attract new members. Meaningful statistics here are not easy to come by, for two reasons: most Presidents' reports are reticent, probably for fear that the Society's subsidy might be endangered; and there are often two different figures, one for paid-up members, and a larger one which includes those who haven't paid. Here's what I've found:

In 1972 there were 140 members, of whom 81 were paid-up. In 1974 there were 125 members, of whom 20 were students. In 1978 the President recorded that the membership had increased and "has now surpassed the 100 mark". This is presumably paid-up members. But now the refugee immigrants who had formed the bulk of the membership were ageing and dying. There are no further figures until the early 90s: 52 paid-up members, then 58, then "around sixty". In 1998 an anxious President reported 31 members. But in the intervening 12 years numbers have held: this year there are 30 paid-up members. This is all the more reason to acclaim the office-holders of that period.

To conclude, to everyone here who has the choice, I'd like to say: don't be a wishbone, a jawbone, or a knucklebone. Be a backbone! To cheer and to motivate you, here's the last stanza of a poem the evergreen Goethe wrote on his own 77<sup>th</sup> birthday: "Am acht und zwanzigsten August 1826":

Von äußerem Drang unangefochten,  
Bleibt, Freunde, so in Eins verflochten,  
Dem Tage gönnet heitern Blick!  
Das Beste schaffet unverdrossen;  
Wohlwollen unsrer Zeitgenossen  
Das bleibt zuletzt erprobtes Glück.

Peter Russell